



AGENDA ITEM: 6

DATE OF MEETING: October 19, 2011

ACTION:   X  

INFORMATION:           

**CHILD SIGNATURE PROGRAM –  
THE POWER OF PRESCHOOL PROGRAM CONTINUATION,  
INCREASED ACCESS, AND QUALITY ENHANCEMENT**

**SUMMARY OF REQUEST**

First 5 California staff requests approval of the continuation, increased access, and quality enhancement of the Power of Preschool program as its Child Signature Program for three years.

**BACKGROUND**

Since its inception with the passage of Proposition 10 in 1998, First 5 California has been charged with implementing early learning programs targeted to children and families of greatest need. The intent of Proposition 10 calls for First 5 California *“to facilitate the creation and implementation of an integrated, comprehensive, and collaborative system of information and services to enhance optimal early childhood development and to ensure that children are ready to enter school.”* The mandate also calls for the State Commission to use outcome-based accountability to determine future expenditures. The program outlined in this proposal will incorporate each of these requirements.

Through investments in programs such as Power of Preschool, First 5 California has helped meet the dire need in our state for making quality early learning programs accessible to children and families of greatest need. In fact, since FY 2007-08, First 5 California has administered at least four programs focused on child outcomes, the Special Needs Project, School Readiness, Migrant Education Even Start, and Power of Preschool, as outlined in Attachment 1.

However, given today’s fiscal reality, with reduced revenues and First 5 California’s recent contributions to state budget solutions totaling nearly \$300 million, the number of early education programs we support that provide direct services to young children has been reduced to just one – Power of Preschool. The program currently is being implemented in eight counties, and the current program funding authorization will end in June 2012.

## **The Science**

The experiences children have as babies, toddlers, and preschoolers shape the kind of students they will become as they enter the K-12 educational system. Neurological science shows that the basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins prenatally and continues into adulthood. A baby's early experiences affect the quality of that architecture by establishing a foundation for all later development, behavior, learning, and health. In order to support healthy brain development, babies' brains require stable, caring, and interactive relationships with adults.<sup>1</sup>

- **90 percent of a child's brain develops in the first five years.**

## **The Child**

A child who is considered to be "at-risk" and who does not receive quality early care and education faces a life filled with disadvantages. At-risk children are 50 percent more likely to be placed in special-education classes, 25 percent more likely to drop out of school, 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime, and 40 percent more likely to become a teen parent.

Conversely, at-risk children who receive high-quality early care and education benefit greatly, even to the point of exceeding national averages on measures of school readiness. In fact, when controlling for risk factors such as maternal education, race, and parents' ages, these gains persist. Kindergarteners who spend their early years in high-quality early care and education programs arrive at elementary school ready to learn and on par with middle-income peers. These children experience the benefits that result from early instruction that includes a focus on language development, literacy, vocabulary growth, and numeracy. Additionally, children in a high-caliber early learning environment acquire the skills that allow them to develop positive relationships with adults and peers, while they learn to withstand disappointments and other pressures. This kind of learning environment educates "the whole child" and serves to help prevent gaps in achievement from developing.

Each year, more than half a million babies are born in California. With approximately 2.8 million children under the age of five, California has more children ages 0 to 5 years than any other state.<sup>2</sup> California also has the highest number of children in the U.S. living in poverty, contributing to a high number of families with limited access to the resources necessary to help children grow up healthy and ready to succeed. The needs of these families are especially acute as early learning programs have been cut, which may limit access and weaken the quality, infrastructure, and services that families rely upon to raise healthy, well-prepared children.

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<sup>1</sup> Center on the Developing Child, The Science of Early Childhood Development, IN BRIEF. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

<sup>2</sup> Census Bureau. California Quick Facts. Retrieved from, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06000.html>

- **Despite the fact that quality programs can help prevent more costly interventions later on, comprehensive early learning programs for children from low-income families remain scarce.**

### **The Power of Preschool Program**

From 2005 through 2009, First 5 California successfully implemented the Power of Preschool program for three- and four-year-olds in low-performing districts. From its inception as a demonstration project in nine counties, the program provided quality enhancement funding to raise the quality and standards for preschool programs. The program design built on and integrated existing public and private preschool providers. To promote quality preschool experiences, local programs were required to meet quality criteria in four main categories: 1) program, 2) teaching staff, 3) policy and fiscal characteristics, and 4) family partnerships. The nine original counties, including San Mateo, participated in the program to improve child and teacher outcomes – including strong school readiness levels for children, high-quality learning environments, and better trained teachers.

As a result of the success of the Power of Preschool program, the State Commission approved additional funding in 2010 and 2011 for eight remaining counties that included funds for expanding services to infants and toddlers. The eight counties are Los Angeles, Merced, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, Santa Clara, Ventura, and Yolo. The current program funding authorization ends on June 30, 2012.

A growing body of research also confirms the importance of quality early learning experiences to effectively prepare young children not only for school, but for life. A recent RAND study,<sup>3</sup> provided in Attachment 2, indicates that quality early care and education programs are lacking throughout California, and the children who need them the most oftentimes do not have access to them. California's current economic situation increases the likelihood that access to such programs may suffer, especially for at-risk children. The commitment of First 5 California to quality early learning experiences and environments for young children and families positions it as an effective champion for enhancing and supporting implementation of quality early learning programs for children ages 0-5.

Included in the agenda item materials is the 2009 *Power of Preschool Program Evaluation Report* that highlights the positive impact that high-quality preschool has on young children and the positive evaluation results of this program.

- **In order to continue services and grow the program to include more county sites to serve more low-income children and families, First 5 California proposes to fund the program for an additional three years.**

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<sup>3</sup> Karoly, L.A., GhoshDastidar, B., Zellman, G.L., Perlman, M., & Fernyhough, L. (2008). *Prepared to learn: The nature and quality of early care and education for preschool-age children in California*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

### **Increased Access**

In addition to maintaining the current Power of Preschool infrastructure, the proposed program enhancements will:

- Help other counties enter the program through a transition process that would include needs assessments, technical assistance, and training to determine individual county program readiness levels
- Expand potential program access to all 58 counties through a competitive application process
- Meet county early childhood education programs “where they are” in terms of program entry
- Build on experiences and knowledge from existing local Power of Preschool programs

### **Quality Enhancement**

The evidence suggests that early learning outcomes from preschool can be stronger if quality is improved, particularly around the engaging, challenging, and well-organized nature of learning tasks in the classroom. The evidence-based focus of enhancing the Power of Preschool program aligns with First 5 California’s teacher signature program, CARES Plus, thus capitalizing on its current investment in improving child outcomes by strengthening the quality of teacher-child interactions and classroom instruction. Design for this program also draws from First 5 California’s current partnership with the Educare Quality Early Learning Model (First 5 California 2008, Strategic Plan). The proposed quality enhancement of the Power of Preschool program will draw on the research-based best practices of the Educare Model (see Attachment 3).

Specifically, the Power of Preschool quality enhancements will:

- Focus on core program features informed by evidence to enhance **quality**
- Build on a **multi-leveled approach**
- Emphasize **program improvement**, informed by data and feedback
- Use **evaluation** to inform future investments

### **PROGRAM ADVISORY COMMITTEE REVIEW**

On October 3, 2011, First 5 California staff met with Commissioner Casey McKeever, as Program Advisory Committee representative, to provide an overview and obtain support

for moving forward on the continuation, increased access, and quality enhancement of the Power of Preschool program.

### **FIRST 5 COUNTY-LEVEL FEEDBACK**

In addition, staff led several efforts to obtain feedback on the Power of Preschool program expansion concept from First 5 county executive directors:

- In August 2011, in collaboration with the First 5 Association, a survey was sent to each First 5 county executive director asking for their feedback on the proposed program enhancement elements and other implementation issues. The results of the survey were returned in September 2011, shared with First 5 California staff and First 5 executive directors, and will be considered during program development.
- On September 30, 2011, First 5 California hosted a meeting with a representative group of county executive directors to go over the survey results, to provide an overview of the program maintenance and enhancement concept, and to obtain feedback and recommendations.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATION**

First 5 California staff recommends the Commission approve the proposal for continuation, increased access, and quality enhancement of the Power of Preschool program for three years starting on July 1, 2012.

### **FISCAL RECOMMENDATION**

First 5 California staff recommends increasing the current Power of Preschool program funding amount from \$19 million up to \$45 million per year to provide children in more counties with the opportunity to attend quality preschools.

### **ATTACHMENTS**

- Attachment 1 - First 5 California Key Early Learning Programs
- Attachment 2 - Rand Study
- Attachment 3 - Power of Preschool Program Requirements Compared to Educare Best Practices